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ABSTRACT

Prospects for making formal principal preparation programs more relevant to actual administrator experience are described in this Digest. First, some of the deficiencies of traditional preparation programs are outlined. Next, ways in which shared decision making and decentralization have affected principals' preservice training needs are described. Subsequent sections discuss the application of problem-based learning to educational administrator training programs, the need for strategic thinking skills, and the importance of collaboration among state agencies, school districts, professional associations, and other agencies for fundamental change. (Contains 7 references.) (LMI)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Prospects in Principal Preparation

by Linda S. Lumsden

Fledgling prospective principals, perched at the edge of insulated academic nests, often find themselves ill-prepared for their maiden flight into the blustery skies of school leadership. As practicing administrators will attest, the match between formal preservice training and the actual demands inherent in being a principal is not a particularly good one.

Today, however, as reform and restructuring efforts gain momentum and greater awareness exists regarding the critical role principals play in the success of school improvement efforts, this situation is starting to change. More energy is being devoted to assessing and addressing deficiencies in preservice training so that future principals will be better prepared for their baptism into the realities of leadership.

What Are Some of the Deficiencies Prevalent in Traditional Principal Preparation Programs?

Administrator training has failed to keep pace with changing times and changing expectations of leaders. As the NASSP publication *Developing School Leaders: A Call for Collaboration* (1992) notes, "Preparation programs in educational administration have been locked into modes of thinking and structures of practice that have been overtaken by changes in the environment."

Typically, students are inundated with theory but have few opportunities to wrestle with applying educational theory to specific professional problems and challenges. Although some preparation programs strive to etch the relationship between theory and practice in students' minds by offering internships or mentorships, in many cases students are still shortchanged because insufficient time is spent carefully planning, and then supervising, these experiences.

The potency of internships as a learning tool can also be diluted by a lack of collaboration between professors and field supervisors, insufficient attention to trainees' emotional development and social support, or absence of a specific plan for solidifying trainees' cognitive linkages between theory and practice within the context of the internship (Schmuck 1993).

Administrator training programs are also found wanting when it comes to preparing students for the hectic pace and varied content of principals' work (Anderson 1991). In addition, strengthening aspiring principals' conflict resolution skills and face-to-face communication skills, and educating trainees about the emotional demands of the principalship are not high priorities in most traditional programs (Anderson). Another area frequently slighted is that of helping trainees assess and respond effectively to "human situations" (Schmuck).

Some even suggest that university-based preparation programs may inadvertently produce "trained incapacity" in principals since the set of skills necessary to survive in graduate school are very different from those required to succeed as a principal (Bridges 1977).

Murphy (1992) considers the present system in need of major surgery, characterizing it as "seriously flawed and...wanting in nearly every aspect." He asserts that changes need to be made not only in the content and pedagogy of preparation programs, but also in methods used to recruit and select students, assess academic fitness, and certify and select principals and superintendents.

How Have Shared Decision-Making and Decentralization Affected Principals' PreserviceTraining Needs?

With the advent of decentralization, it is becoming less common for principals to simply execute decisions and implement solutions handed down from above. Unlike the past, when the principal was the sole figure at the helm, principals are increasingly expected to tap into problem-identification skills and problem-solving skills resident within staff and community members. Today, *how* decisions are made is considered nearly as important as *which* decisions are made. As school-based management becomes more prevalent, and more players participate in the decision-making process, it is vital for principals to be well-versed in group process skills and problem-solving strategies (Murphy and Hallinger 1992).

Although there are many benefits associated with shared decision-making, expanding the pool of decision-makers increases the probability that "the values that

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underlie the school's operation [will] become an arena for conflict" (Murphy and Hallinger). In light of this, it is prudent to provide trainees with the opportunity to examine and prioritize their education- and leadership-related values and to hone their conflict management skills.

Can Problem-Based Learning Make Training Programs More Relevant?

Originally used primarily in the training of medical students, problem-based learning (PBL) is a promising strategy that has recently appeared on the horizon of principal preparation. Instead of lecturing or leading a discussion, an instructor using PBL presents students with a hypothetical situation (called a *project*) that is likely to confront practicing administrators. After exposure to theory and research on the topic, the class divides into small groups and attempts to devise a solution to the dilemma.

Edwin Bridges (1992), a pioneer in the use of PBL in educational management classes, identifies three major goals emphasized in problem-stimulated learning, one form of PBL: (1) the development of administrative skills, (2) the development of problem-solving skills, and (3) the acquisition of the knowledge base that underlies administrative practice.

Although the application of PBL to the training of school administrators is still in its infancy, members of Peabody College of Education at Vanderbilt University have already put a hi-tech face on the concept by creating a problem-based computer simulation called In the Center of Things (ITCOT).

Designed to teach students to think strategically about instructional leadership and school improvement, ITCOT allots students $30,000 and 2,000 hours to address problems contributing to low test scores in a hypothetical elementary school. Students are supplied with a "knowledge-base" of thirty-three programmatic approaches to improving student achievement. To give students a taste of the complexity and uncertainty of actual school improvement efforts, the simulation calculates the costs and benefits of each strategy depending on which other strategies have already been decided upon and at what point in the process they were utilized (Hallinger and McCary 1992).

What Other Skills Do Aspiring Principals Need?

Whereas past research sought to identify particular behaviors associated with principal effectiveness, more consideration is now being given to the thought processes from which principal behaviors germinate. As Hallinger and McCary (1992) state, "It is not enough for principals to have a repertoire of behaviors; they must know how and when to use them, and they must be careful to monitor their effects on student learning."

By emphasizing strategic thinking skills, instructors can increase trainees' understanding of what elements to consider when deciding which behavior to pull out of their administrative hats. A strategic approach to leadership involves forethought and planning, awareness of how actions within a social system are related and affect one another, and purposeful coordination of resources (Hallinger and McCary).

How Important Is Collaboration Among Those Having a Stake in Principal Preparation?

A recent report published by NASSP (1992) stresses the need for a coordinated approach to change on the part of all those who have a legitimate stake in administrator preparation. In addition to stakeholders in the university environment, four other groups have strong, but varied, interests in preparation: state agencies that accredit programs and license practitioners; school districts that employ those emerging from programs; professional associations that provide services including training; and other agencies such as assessment centers, principal academies, LEAD Centers, and unions that strive to raise the level of administrative leadership in schools.

Before fundamental change can occur, the roles and functions performed by each entity must be understood and all those with a stake in preparation must "work together for better communication, cooperation, and mutual action" (NASSP).

Resources

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